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Pathways to Leadership: Four Women's Journeys to the Peace Negotiation Table in the Fight for Democracy in Burma

by Brittany DeSanctis Shelmon*

Introduction

As Burma stands at the threshold of peace, the burden that the more than sixty-year conflict has placed on women is being pushed to the sidelines. Despite their marginalization, this lack of acknowledgment does not come from a lack of organization by the women in Burma. Often seen as radicals, troublemakers, and nuisances by their male, military counterparts, women in Burma and those living as refugees elsewhere in Southeast Asia have been fighting for their needs and inclusion for the past two decades. Though all of the women that I consulted while working to construct the story of the women's movement have had different pathways to leadership, they all share a common experience of women's marginalization and a strong desire to assume decision-making roles in Burma and among the political parties.

Through several interviews in January of 2016, I caught a glimpse into the struggles and triumphs of the women occupying leadership positions in the reform movement in Burma. The topic of women in power, though historically untouched, has also been visited recently by nongovernmental organizations such as the Swedish Burma Committee and the Transnational Institute.¹ These organizations, as well as the Center for Constitutional Democracy, investigate how to help women's groups achieve their main goal of obtaining a seat at the decision-making table over the next era of peace negotiations. Throughout my conversations with these women, the most moving aspect was their defiance of the traditional view of who could be a leader and how change should come about in Burma. Instead of focusing on the distinctive nature of each group, they focused on the way that connecting with one another could empower them and further their cause. These four stories of women effectuating change in their societies show the diversity of leadership among women in Burma while also redefining what it means to be a powerful leader in a revolution.

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¹ THE TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE, NO WOMAN, NO PEACE: GENDER EQUALITY, CONFLICT AND PEACE IN BURMA (Myanmar Policy Briefings No. 18, Jan. 2016), https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/myanmar_briefing_18.pdf.

I. Tay Tay

“I [was a] rebel from the beginning,”² recalled Tay Tay, a co-founder and representative of the Shan Women’s Action Network (SWAN) and the Women’s League of Burma (WLB).³ “As a woman [in our generation] you [had to] go against everything, everything, you have had to fight for it, and that’s me.”⁴

Growing up in a family very involved in the Shan independence movement, Tay Tay was never denied a place in the fight for her people. She was, however, directed away from the traditional path of resistance in the jungle and encouraged to pursue her education. “My great supporter is my father My father told me that [I had] to be educated, that [I could] not go to the jungle.”⁵ Looking back on his advice, she sees that he was wise to advise her to receive an education as opposed to the more traditional route into the movement. “For girls, you have to be educated because you can’t go into the jungle and fight.”⁶

Though attending university to become a teacher in Burma during the 1960's was still a struggle for a woman, Tay Tay flourished. Her education gave her a special role as she joined her brothers in the constitutional protests over the 1974 reforms. In 1962, the Burmese army took power in fear of the growing ethnic states’ power.⁷ The 1974 constitution instituted a one-party socialist system and stressed the importance of national unity in the country, including a unified culture, language, and education.⁸

The year of the student uprising in Burma – 1988 -- has become famous for its public demonstrations of unrest.⁹ Fighting for democracy, the students of Burma opposed the government over severe economic depression, political oppression, and human rights abuses carried out with impunity across the country. Tay Tay’s education equipped her with a purpose during the 1988 uprising. Along with other teachers, Tay Tay wrote speeches for leaders in the reform movement in secret. “As a teacher, we [were] not supposed to support the uprising, but we did . . . [as] the government’s servant, you [could not] do anything.”¹⁰¹¹ Thousands were killed during this demonstration and

² Interview with Nang Lao Liang Won (Tay Tay), Representative from Women’s League of Burma and Shan Women’s Action Network, in Chiang Mai, Thailand (Jan. 17, 2016).

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Robert H. Taylor, *Burma’s National Unity Problem and the 1974 Constitution*, 1 CONTEMP. SE. ASIA 232, 234 (1979).

⁸ *See id.* at 234, 239.

⁹ U Maung Maung, *The 1988 Uprising in Burma*, (Yale University; New Haven, 1999).

¹⁰ Interview with Nang Lao Liang Won (Tay Tay), *supra* note 1.

¹¹ Kathleen Allden et al., *Burmese Political Dissidents in Thailand: Trauma and Survival Among Young Adults in Exile*, 86 AM. J. PUB. HEALTH 1561, 1561 (1996).

thousands more took to the jungle to hide from authority or to join revolutionary groups.¹² The repression suffered by the 1988 generation caused Tay Tay to flee to Thailand. “Enough was enough,”¹³ she said, unwilling to conform her political opinions and work to the regime’s demands.

Arriving in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 1989, Tay Tay took a backseat in the movement, lay low and taught English in the community. The family member that fled with her was still involved in helping the Shan people from afar, but she did not consider herself a part of the movement until the Burmese government forced the Shan people to migrate in 1996.

The forced relocations in Shan State . . . got me mobilized [into working for the ethnic nationalities]¹⁴. . . many Shan people came to Chiang Mai, they didn’t know the language, when they came they came with their whole family. . . . The Thai government didn’t recognize them as refugees because they were forced to leave because of forced relocations not from direct fighting.¹⁵

Though she was not involved in the conflict at that time, the plight of the refugees coming across moved her to join the Migrant Assistance Program (MAP).¹⁶

Through this work, she realized that numerous voices were being left out of the movement. Having obtained support from the Asian Pacific Women’s Law and Development (APWLD), she and other volunteers started collecting information on migrant women and their particular struggles.¹⁷ “At the time [when international interest in the migrant community was growing] Burma signed CEDAW [Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women] . . . it turned out that Images Asia said that maybe we should do a shadow report.”¹⁸ Because Tay Tay still held a Burmese passport, she was able to cross the border many times to collect information for CEDAW on the condition of women’s health, education, and rights without being flagged as an international presence.¹⁹ With the success and reception of the CEDAW shadow report, Tay Tay and her colleagues were eager to start their next project and wanted to create something for the women in their community. When a funding opportunity arose, they sought to bring women from all of the ethnic nationalities together.²⁰

¹² *See id.*

¹³ Interview with Nang Lao Liang Won (Tay Tay), *supra* note 1.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

We didn't know yet what we would call it but [we knew that] we would like to meet those women [from other groups].²¹ There are women around us...there are women migrants, some of them are sex workers, some of them work for NGOs, some of them were foreigners . . . [from] different backgrounds and we wanted to meet them, and we started in a friend's garden, this is how we started.²²

A desire to meet and gain the perspectives of other women in their community launched the Women's Exchange, a program that has now spread across Burma and across ethnic communities in the surrounding countries.²³ Women's Exchange sparked conversations about women's issues in the country. It also ignited women's desire to work together and exchange information about their groups' struggles.²⁴ Shortly after beginning Women's Exchange, representatives of individual ethnic women's groups came together in the First Forum that would become the foundation for the Women's League of Burma.²⁵

II. Susanna

My mother is a teache[r], she really would like us to be educated, so she trained us, taught us at school and at the house as we grew. My father is a tough guy, very tough, and when he was young he was [a soldier], so he is very tough. So the combination of the two of them is with me. I'm tough, and I love education.²⁶

Susanna has been elected recently to the Amyutha Hluttaw as a Member of Parliament (MP) for the National League for Democracy (NLD), making her one of only twenty-three women that sit in the 224-member Upper House of the Burmese federal legislature.²⁷ Before obtaining this position, she served as the Executive Director of Karen Women's Action Group (KWAG).²⁸ Though at the time we spoke she was preparing to turn that office over to her second-in-command, it was clear that she was

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ See *The Founding and Development of the Women's League of Burma: A Herstory*, WOMEN'S LEAGUE OF BURMA 19–21 (Nov. 23, 2011), <http://womenofburma.org/publications/WLB/WLB%20Herstory%20-%20Eng.pdf>.

²⁶ Interview with Susanna Hla Hla Soe, Exec. Dir. of Karen Women's Action Grp. and Member of Parliament for Nat'l League for Democracy, in Yangon, Myan. (Jan. 5, 2016).

²⁷ See *Mynanmar Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities)*, INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION, http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2389_E.htm (last visited Mar. 30, 2016).

²⁸ See *A Voice for Peace*, RADIO FREE ASIA, http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2389_E.htm (last visited Mar. 30, 2016).

working to ensure that the group in which she has been so instrumental continues to run smoothly.

As part of the '88 generation, Susanna was involved in the major political protests that occurred among university students in that era.

[It was a] very challenging and exciting time, and we really hoped for the new future for our country. Many people died, some of my friend[s] died in front of me, some of my friends fled to the border area, so it hurt me a lot. I, myself I have too fled. Because when the military broke our uprising, so I have to hide in the jungle for 3–4 months.²⁹

Because of family connections she was able to come out of the jungle without being targeted by the government or forced to flee the country.³⁰ Though she did not stay in the jungle with other '88 generation members, she did continue to fight for freedom in the country as a teacher, later moving to World Vision, a large international organization focused on the needs of children in crisis situations worldwide, and finally founding and running KWAG.³¹

Working with World Vision,³² Susanna realized that she couldn't make the kind of close-to-the-ground impact that she desired.

When I was working in the international organization, we [had] so many cases from Karen women who were raped, who were trafficked, and I couldn't help much There were so many rules so many steps . . . they [were a] big organization, so they [had] red tape, so they had so many steps to help. So I quit and then I started my own organization to help the women. We have our own lawyers group and our own community group and we educate each other so I think this effective, small and effective.³³

Recognizing this familiar problem with international organizations, Susanna helped to organize and run KWAG since its beginning in 2003.

She received governmental recognition for her hands-on approach following Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Cyclone Nargis had a substantial economic and humanitarian impact in Burma, as well as an interesting political consequence.³⁴ According to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 84,500 people died and over 50,000

²⁹ Interview with Susanna Hla Hla Soe, *supra* note 24.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

³² See WORLD VISION, <http://www.worldvision.org> (last visited Mar. 30, 2016).

³³ Interview with Susanna Hla Hla Soe, *supra* note 24.

³⁴ Fatimah Lateef, *Cyclone Nargis and Myanmar: A Wake Up Call*, 2 J. EMERG. TRAUMA SHOCK 106 (2009).

were reported missing in the wake of the cyclone on May 2, 2008.³⁵ The cyclone also coincided with what was supposed to be the nationwide referendum on the newly drafted 2008 constitution.³⁶ Despite the destruction by the cyclone, the government of Burma decided to go on as scheduled with the referendum only two weeks after the storm ended.³⁷ The severe flooding in the country and the lack of humanitarian response by the government left many people unable to access necessary information about the constitution or participate in the referendum.³⁸ Susanna and KWAG were active on the front lines of humanitarian aid during this devastating time.

There [was] a big cyclone in 2008, so the government also recognized that there [was] a small group helping the victims. The U.N. secretary also came, the country leaders came and [met] with us. [They said] ‘There is a small group who are in the jungle, who are in Myanmar, who are in Karen state who are helping the needy people’ so the government started to recognize us as a [Civil Society Organization].³⁹

Since the recognition by the international community and the Burmese government, KWAG has grown in both size and recognition, leading to Susanna's involvement with the NLD—a relationship that has resulted in her recent election as MP in Burma's Upper House.

III. Thin Thin Aung

Thin Thin Aung was working in a Government ministry when the '88 uprising began. She decided to leave the government and join the students in the street to fight for a democratic system for Burma.⁴⁰

I participated actively in the democracy movement of 1988. You know, the famous 8/8/88. Although the military shut it down totally. Many students were killed in the street . . . and because of [the bloodshed], I was

³⁵ *Myanmar: Cyclone Nargis 2008 Facts and Figures*, INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF RED CROSS & RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES (May 3, 2011, 12:16 CET), <http://www.ifrc.org/en/news-and-media/news-stories/asia-pacific/myanmar/myanmar-cyclone-nargis-2008-facts-and-figures>.

³⁶ *See Reject Constitutional Referendum: Government's Poor Cyclone Response Shows Need for Democratic Reform*, HUM. RTS. WATCH (May 17, 2008), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/05/17/burma-reject-constitutional-referendum>.

³⁷ *See* MICHAEL F. MARTIN & RHODA MARGESSON, CONG. RESEARCH SERV., RL34481, CYCLONE NARGIS AND BURMA'S CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM 11 (2008), *available at* <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/105169.pdf>.

³⁸ *See id.* at 11–13.

³⁹ Interview with Susanna Hla Hla Soe, *supra* note 24.

⁴⁰ Interview with Thin Thin Aung, Advisory Bd. Member, Women's League of Burma, in Yangon, Myan. (Jan. 6, 2016).

very angry. [N]onviolence and peaceful means [did not work] and I went to join the armed struggle.⁴¹

The group of '88 generation students all spread to different areas of the jungle, including the Thai-Burma and India-Burma Borders.

We got the connection from [the] Indian embassy in Yangon, somehow we were [told] that there is a channel to India. The Indian government will also help to liberate Burma like they [helped in] Bangladesh, so we had that kind of expectation. [We thought they would] give us military training, support... [but] after living one year in the camp there was no military training, and no other support apart from a ration of food and shelter... [they only gave us] the artificial weapons, not real weapons, only weapons made by wood!⁴²

After not receiving the help that they anticipated, the Burmese student group of roughly 40 students moved to other towns in Mizoram state to look for work.⁴³ Mizoram state is known for its large population of refugees from Burma,⁴⁴ especially large groups of Chin people, as their state sits close to the Indian border.

After applying for refugee status in India, Thin Thin Aung was able to begin professionally working to help the Burmese democracy movement by encouraging Indian political parties to support their struggle. Through this work she began to realize that there were more problems facing the people of Burma than just their governmental structure.

After some time, refugees from [the] border [arrive] . . . and among them, children and women I found out that there were other needs [in Burma] besides democracy needs. There are the needs of women and children. So, [in 1995,] I founded my women's organization, Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma.⁴⁵

The Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma (WRWAB), now a member of the larger network of the Women's League of Burma, focuses on training women on political issues, health care, and women's rights concerns.⁴⁶ In their founding city of

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *The Plight of Myanmar's Chins in India*, IRIN (Jan. 3, 2014), <http://www.irinnews.org/report/99417/analysis-plight-myanmar%E2%80%99s-chins-india>.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ See *Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma*, MYANMAR (BURMA) NON-PROFIT DIRECTORY, <https://ngo.mycitizen.net/directory/listing/womens-rights-and-welfare-association-of-burma> (last visited Mar. 30, 2016).

Delhi they were able to establish a health care center for Burmese migrants intended to provide primary care and medicinal needs at no cost.⁴⁷

In 1998, Thin Thin Aung's organization began contacting other women's organizations in refugee areas throughout Southeast Asia. Though communication was complicated, the first meeting of the Women's Forum met in Chiang Mai.

Karen women, Shan women, Kachin women, Rakhain women [were in] Bangladesh, Thailand, India, all around. At that time we had no email, but so we wrote letters to each other, we exchanged ideas through letter, then we decided [that in] 1998, [we would meet] for the first time The first women's forum in 1998, we came together in Chiang Mai. We decided to meet again next year, and that's when we decided to form [the Women's League of Burma], WLB.⁴⁸

The WLB now serves as one of Burma's premier networks of women's organizations, and helps to create a unified voice for women involved in the democracy movement. In addition to its empowerment of women's voices, the League also advances crucial women's rights issues in the country.⁴⁹ The WLB has received the Madeleine K. Albright Grant from the National Endowment for Democracy, along with awards from the Women's Democracy Network and the Gruber Foundation⁵⁰

Thin Thin Aung shares that the WLB's most beneficial advancement for women in the movement was its promotion of a voice for women at the table when the military and political groups were not truly open to non-male involvement. "We [wanted] to raise the women's voices in this democracy movement because before [the] WLB was formed, [the military and political leadership] never invited the women to political meetings."⁵¹ The political groups would contend that, because there were so many women's groups, they were not sure whom they should actually invite, and therefore did not invite anyone. Thin Thin Aung says that the WLB solved this problem: "we had to be together, form one [group], united, stronger, one voice. [T]hen, after [as a result] they [had] to invite us."⁵²

IV. Pansy

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ Interview with Thin Thin Aung, *supra* note 37.

⁴⁹ See *Mission and Values*, WOMEN'S LEAGUE OF BURMA, <http://womenofburma.org/aboutus/mission-and-values> (last visited Mar. 30, 2016).

⁵⁰ *Awards*, WOMEN'S LEAGUE OF BURMA, <http://womenofburma.org/aboutus/awards> (last visited Mar. 30, 2016).

⁵¹ Interview with Thin Thin Aung, *supra* note 37.

⁵² *Id.*

“We were never able to talk about gender equality, because the government [thought] that it wasn’t an issue, that inequality didn’t exist in Myanmar. So they have always been resisting.”⁵³ Pansy states, outlining the position of the Burmese government for many years. Pansy is the head of the Local Resource Network, a group that focuses on coordinating Burmese civil society organizations. She is also co-chair of the Gender Equality Network (GEN).

Before Pansy began these networks, she worked with the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFP), where she saw how the government barred any discussion or action towards gender equality in the country.

I was working with the UNFP and of course one of our three pillars is gender equality. We were not able to do anything in that respect because the government won’t allow us There was always conversation but nothing much had happened. Even UNFP, who had a mandate to address gender equality issues, were not able to do anything.”⁵⁴

It was disheartening for women in Burma to see the unwillingness of the government to address the real systemic problems in society even when the international community was there to help.

When a natural disaster struck Burma in 2008, Pansy understood the importance of grabbing onto the government’s limitations and creating a foothold for women’s issues. In the wake of a natural disaster, the government realized that it was out of its depth with the amount of humanitarian aid that was needed and the amount of civil unrest stirred up by the tragedy. Cyclone Nargis hit Burma on the eve of an important political transition in the country, and proved the government’s inability to serve the basic needs of its citizens. In response to the government’s weak response, many civil society organizations took the chance to legitimize themselves to the government. “This network was formed actually after the Cyclone Nargis that hit us in 2008 and previous to that women’s issues or gender issues were never, ever on the agenda.”⁵⁵ Despite its aversion to women’s groups in the past, the government accepted help from the women’s groups knowing that it was the only way to contain the dissatisfaction.⁵⁶

Among the many systemic issues that were brought into the public eye in the wake of the cyclone was gender-based violence, and the government allowed the women’s groups to look into this issue. “There was so much to be done for women, gender based violence came up as one of the top challenges . . . so we were taking that as an entry point.”⁵⁷ The

⁵³ Interview with Pansy Tun Thein, Exec. Dir., Local Res. Ctr., in Yangon, Myan. (Jan. 5, 2016).

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ *Id.*

women's organizations formed a technical working group on women's issues in Burma, which they at first called the Women's Protection Technical Working Group.⁵⁸

This technical working group went on for many years and we were able to encompass also the government sector, the UN, and the civil society,⁵⁹ and this technical working group finally changed its name to Gender Equality in 2012 only, when we felt that the government was receptive of the term gender equality. So now it is known as GEN.⁶⁰

GEN is now one of the leading groups in Burma advocating gender equality and women's empowerment, with a focus on impacting government decisions.⁶¹ Through the larger coordinating network created by GEN, the group is able to develop policy that addresses a wide range of women's issues; takes into account the perspectives of international organizations, ethnic organizations, and governmental groups; and best serves the women of Burma.

Conclusion

Sharing the burden of resistance with the men in the movement has not afforded the women interviewed for this paper a seat at the negotiating table. Nevertheless, Tay Tay, Susanna, Thin Thin Aung, and Pansy have pushed to have their voices heard in the Burmese resistance movement, and paved the way for other women to join the peace process. All four women saw problems facing their people that others would not or could not address, and took it upon themselves to fight for solutions.

Women's input is a crucial component to ensuring a stable and inclusive peace process and democracy in every society. As the Transitional Institute's report indicates, not bringing women into peace processes "greatly undermine[s] the potential for sustainable peace."⁶² Despite this fact, it is rare to find equal representation for women even in countries not facing political instability and civil war. Nevertheless, the women above have commanded the attention of their male counterparts, the government, and the international stage with their unified vision of an equitable Burma where women's voices are not only included but expected and valued in political discourse.

Their fight for change in their country, their desire for knowledge and connection with the experiences and opinions of women, and their understanding of problems facing

⁵⁸ *Gender Equality Network*, LOCAL RESOURCE CENTRE, <http://lrcmyanmar.org/en/ngo-donor-profiles/gender-equality-network-gen-%E2%80%93-formerly-women%E2%80%99s-protection-technical-working-group> (last visited Mar. 30, 2016).

⁵⁹ Interview with Pansy Tun Thein, *supra* note 37.

⁶⁰ Interview with Pansy Tun Thein, *supra* note 37.

⁶¹ *Gender Equality Network*, *supra* note 54.

⁶² THE TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE, *supra* note 1, at 1–2.

women in Burma make them effective leaders in the movement. In a country that is often defined by its divisions, the women's organizations have formed alliances. They found their power through furthering their connections and presenting a unified front in their fight for inclusion. Though Tay Tay, Susanna, Thin Thin Aung, and Pansy have all had very different experiences politically and professionally, they have all very successfully connected and empowered women to fight for a better future in Burma.